

Drowning (but only for a moment) by EmeraldTulip

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Summary:

“You love him,” El says, shutting Will’s bedroom door behind her, and it really isn’t a question.

He knows who she’s talking about.

Will tries to open his mouth, to shake his head, anything, but nothing happens. He sits down on his bed, hard, airway suddenly closing up. She’s looking at him expectantly, and then the dam breaks and he’s drowning in his lies until he can’t anymore.

“Yes,” he breathes out harshly. “I do.”

Drowning (but only for a moment)

Author's Note:

hi again! this is a byeler fic with past mileven, set approximately four years after the events of season 2. I'm assuming jopper is happening, so they're the byers-hopper family now and they all live in the old byers home.

i wrote this all today, so excuse any errors - i was really eager to post this because there are certain lines that are some of the best I've ever written. anyway, without further ado, enjoy!

Present day (March, 1988)

He loves him.

And it's not like he *wants* to be in love with his best friend, necessarily. Because really, it's not a great feeling *or* situation. But he isn't exactly trying to stop it from happening, either.

It's just... whenever Mike drapes an arm over his shoulder, Will feels his heartbeat speed up. And they always somehow find a way to tangle their fingers together when their families have Byers-Hopper-Wheeler-Sinclair-Henderson-Mayfield (plus Harrington, sometimes) movie nights. And Will sometimes can't help but feel that he was perfectly made to rest his head on Mike's shoulder.

But Mike is with Eleven, El, his dream girl, Will's sister. Mike will never want him like that—everything he does with Will he only views as platonic, anyway. Will knows that as a fact. So he is perfectly content to be Mike's best friend until his feelings blow over. It'll hurt for a while, he knows, but he'll survive.

I love him, he thinks to himself, gazing at the side of a dark-haired head as he absently turns a page in his textbook.

“Will,” El says quietly, touching his shoulder, and he startles back to

attention.

“Yeah, El?” he replies quickly, shaking the fuzziness from his head. They’re in last period math class, and Will is good enough at the subject that he doesn’t *have* to pay attention all the time. Mike is doodling absently on his paper next to him, squiggles and swirls that form a raging black-ink sea on his homework, and on El’s right, Max is concentratedly tearing a sheet of graph paper into neat strips that pile up on the corner of her desk like the foam caps of waves.

“Talk at home?” she asks.

He furrows his brow, because her tone sounds really serious. “Uh, yeah. Sure. You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she tells him instantly, and he can sense she isn’t lying.

He gives her a half-frown and a nod before turning back around in his seat.

“I love you. You know that, right?” El asks as they walk through the front door, and Will frowns at her.

“Yeah,” he replies easily, confused. “Thanks. I love you, too.” Because they’re siblings now, and they’ve been through a lot, and they know their minds are connected somehow so they would *have* to love each other even if they didn’t want to—which they do. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” El replies. “I just wanted you to know that before I say anything else.” She strides down the hall and walks into Will’s room, pulling him behind her.

“El—”

“You love him,” El says, shutting Will’s bedroom door behind her, and it really isn’t a question.

He knows who she’s talking about.

Will tries to open his mouth, to shake his head, *anything*, but nothing

happens. He sits down on his bed, hard, airway suddenly closing up. She's looking at him expectantly, and then the dam breaks and he's drowning in his lies until he can't anymore.

"Yes," he breathes out harshly. "I do."

She just stares at him, no judgement where there should be, and that in itself crushes him, like water pouring into his lungs. He's *different*, he's *weird*, he's a *freak*, because he's never had a girlfriend and he doesn't want one, and because he still cries at night even though the tangible nightmares are gone, because he sees the vines as he sleeps and catches sight of people he doesn't know, and the knowledge of that haunts him—but it doesn't seem to bother her. Her eyes bore into his soul, and he can feel their link shuddering under her need to press in and his to shut her out. "What will you do?"

He shakes his head—finally. "Nothing. I—I'm sorry."

"For what?" El asks, and she sounds genuinely confused.

Will blinks at her. "You love him, and he loves you. I thought you would be... angry, I guess."

"Oh, I *am* angry," she says, grinning in a way that doesn't match her words. "I'm angry you didn't tell me sooner, because I knew." She reaches forward, taking his hands into hers. "Can I tell you a secret?"

He doesn't really know how to respond, so he just nods because it sounds like she wants to tell him.

She takes a breath. "Mike and I? We love each other, but not like that."

"But you're dating!" Will yelps, almost reflexively pulling his hands away in his shock.

She keeps her hold firm. "Were. Haven't been for five months."

"Five—five *months*?" Will is almost screeching at this point, though in his defense, it's pretty quiet. "But—but I thought—"

"We let you think we were still together because Mike asked me to,"

El says calmly. “And I would do anything he asked of me. But we’re not dating anymore.”

He squeezes his eyes shut. “Why? Why aren’t you dating anymore? And why did you lie?”

“No,” she says sharply. “We didn’t lie. We never said, ‘we’re still dating’, you just assumed we were and we didn’t correct you. And we realized that we don’t belong together that way.”

“But—”

“Why are you so against the idea?” El laughs, cutting him off. “Your whole problem was about you liking Mike and me still dating him, right? That’s not an issue.”

“No, I just—ugh.” He buries his face in his hands, because El is being difficult on purpose and they both know it. She doesn’t know much about social cues but she certainly must have picked up on the fact that boys only hold hands with girls. And Will is definitively not a girl. “Why did you act like you were still together?”

At that, El’s face shutters slightly. “You’ll have to ask Mike that, Will.”

Five months earlier (November, 1987)

“You love him,” El says, not looking up from her book.

Mike chokes, dropping the Han Solo action figure he’d been messing around with as he instantly glances up the stairs—Will had gone up to get snacks for their three-person movie night, and his chatter with Mike’s mother is clear even from where he and El are sitting on the couch in the basement. “What?”

“You love him,” El repeats, finally looking up from her book, resting it on her knees. “Will. You do.”

Mike swallows, because something is telling him that it’s true but he doesn’t want to listen. “El, what? We’re literally dating, and you’re telling me that I’m in love with someone else? My *best friend*?”

She shrugs. “Yes. I thought it was obvious.”

“El, you’re my *girlfriend*,” Mike emphasizes, waving his hands. “I like girls!” A pretty solid argument, he thinks, until—

She shrugs again. “You can like girls and boys, I think. I know I do. And Nancy’s talked about it.”

Mike just splutters for a minute because *whoa, okay, that just happened.* “Wh—okay, okay, fine. Either way, I’m still dating you.”

She looks back down at her book. “Right. About that.”

Mike understands immediately, and his heart seizes in terror. “Oh, no. Oh, no no no no. El...”

“Mike,” she sighs, eyes fixed to the page though she doesn’t turn it. “I love you. Really. But I don’t think I love you like that anymore, and I know the same goes for you.”

“I...” He tries to argue, but she’s psychic so she knows and he understands that she’s right anyway. “Right.” He rubs a hand over his face. “No, you’re right. I just...” He reaches out, taking her hands once she puts her book down. “I really do love you, and I don’t want to lose you. Ever again.”

“You won’t,” she answers instantly. “I promise.”

He smiles at her before he registers his mother’s voice upstairs, and a vise of anxiety suddenly grips his heart. “Oh, no.”

“What?” El asks, squeezing his hands. “What’s wrong?”

“My mom,” he tells her. “My mom can’t know that we’re not dating anymore. She can’t know that I...” *like Will*, his mind supplies, but he can’t say it. El looks like she wants to argue, because even after all this time she still doesn’t really understand societal norms despite noticing the trends, but he shakes his head. “And he can’t know either, he won’t... no one will react well to this. El, *please*. We can’t tell her, we can’t tell him. We can’t tell anyone.”

The basement door creaks open and Will’s voice floods down. El

glares at Mike, quickly saying, “Fine, but we’re talking more about this later!” She lets go of his hands and leans back on the couch, picking up her book once more.

“Hey,” Will greets, flopping over El’s feet and pressing up against Mike’s side, and *damn*, Mike is so screwed. Will grins at him, and he feels his heart flutter in a way he hadn’t realized it always has until El pointed it out to him. “Popcorn?”

Present day (March, 1988)

I love him. God, I love him. He looks up at the ceiling.

“Mike?”

They’re in the Byers-Hopper house, the windows dark and frosted with the light dusting of snow falling from the nighttime March sky. Will is sprawled out on his mattress, Mike wrapped up in a sleeping bag at the foot of the bed. El and Max are sleeping soundly in El’s room (the one that used to be Jonathan’s), while Lucas and Dustin are crashing in the living room—it is almost three in the morning, after all.

Will doesn’t think he’ll be able to sleep tonight—the nightmares aren’t so bad the further he gets away from November, but his thoughts are running wild and sometimes they do flash back to that horrible place.

“Yeah?” Mike’s voice is heavy with sleep even though he hasn’t actually dozed off at all quite yet. He lowers his flashlight, dog-earing the page of the book he’s reading and closing it. “What’s up?”

Will hesitates for a moment before spitting it out. “Why didn’t you tell anyone that you and El broke up?”

He watches Mike freeze, eyes wide in a deer-in-the-headlights way. “I—I, uh...” He shakes his head as though to clear his thoughts. “How did you know about that?”

“El told me,” he admits, and Mike’s eyes darken. “It’s not her fault, though!” he continues immediately. He taps his head, quickly

thinking up a believable half-truth. “We’re linked, you know?” He frowns. “But you didn’t answer the question.”

Mike sighs, rubbing a hand down his face. “I thought... I thought it would be easier. I don’t know. And I didn’t want my mom to know that I broke up with El—Jane. My dad, too. They’d ask why, and I wouldn’t have an answer good enough for them.”

“Well, that’s okay, Mike,” Will says softly. “But why didn’t you tell us? Lucas, Dustin, Max? Why didn’t you tell *me*?” Mike mumbles something that Will doesn’t catch. “What?”

“It’s complicated,” Mike repeats, a little louder.

Will laughs slightly. *Try me.* “Why?”

“Because I’m in love with someone else,” Mike spills, like water pouring from his lips. “And my parents wouldn’t like it. The person I like probably wouldn’t like it, either.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Will grins, genuine, though it hurts a little to know that Mike is in love with someone else, someone who isn’t El and certainly isn’t him. “Who is it?”

Mike can’t seem to meet his eyes. “Would it sound cheesy if I said it was you?”

Will’s heart stops. “That’s not funny.”

Mike’s face falls. “Huh?”

“Did Eleven tell you?” Will asks, voice still deathly quiet. “Did she tell you I like you? Is this all some stupid joke? Did you plan this whole thing just to... to make fun of me?” Because that would hurt more than *anything*, even if it sounds kind of crazy in retrospect. His sister and his best friend who he’s in love with teaming up to make him miserable would break him.

“What? No. Will,” Mike says, louder than the other boy but not loud enough to wake anyone up. “Hey. Look at me.” He catches Will’s hands, looks him in the eyes. “You like me?”

Will wants to look away, to lie, but Mike's gaze is so dark and beautiful that he *can't*. "Yes."

Mike laughs then, loud and open. "That's good, Will," he tells him, "because I like you, too. And I promise I'm not making fun of you. I'm telling you the truth."

With that, Will's mind goes blank, and he does the only thing he can think of doing: he kisses Mike.

Three months later (June, 1988)

"I love him," Mike says, staring down at the tablecloth. Crickets chirp outside the window in the summer heat as Nancy squeezes his hand beneath the table. "And I know you're not gonna be happy about it, but *I love him*."

It's silent for a moment, and Mike feels his heart in his throat.

"Michael," his father finally sighs, "I know that you've never quite grown out of your rebel phase—or whatever you want to call it—but this is taking it a step too far. You don't have to invent these ridiculous lies to get us all worked up."

Nancy's hand tightens around his own, and Mike returns that with an equal fervor. *Ridiculous lies? He believed that whole story about Russians in Hawkins!* "Dad, it's not... I'm not—I'm not making this up to... to prove something to you, or to *bother* you. And I don't want to disappoint you, but it's *true*. Everything they say at school, about me, about *Will*, it's all *true*."

His mother jumps in, and Holly purposefully tosses her peas onto the ground like a typical seven-year-old. "But, Michael, what about Jane? You two are so cute and happy. She's so polite and sweet! You like her, *we* like her, you went to the dance together! What about her?"

Mike rolls his eyes. "Mom, we broke up *eight months ago*. Are you even listening to me? This isn't about Jane, this is about Will!"

A sharp thud of a fist hitting the table cuts him off, and he jumps back as his father's voice bursts out. Holly lets out a yelp. "I won't

stand for this, son. This is some silly idea that Byers boy put into your head—the Mayfield girl as well, most likely. Everyone knows they’re trouble. I *told* you to associate yourself with a different crowd, Michael.”

Mike’s mind goes blank for a moment out of rage—his father is acting like he doesn’t know Will at all, like he and Mike haven’t been friends for over a literal decade. He’s acting like Will is some sort of bad influence, like Max is a maliciously manipulative person, when they’re *not*. He can’t stand that.

Nancy tries to cut in, to defend him, thank God. She doesn’t get very far. “Dad, he—”

“We’re done here,” he says succinctly, and Mike vaguely realizes that this is the most emotive he’s ever seen his father. “Karen, make sure Holly goes to bed. Nancy, go... do your homework. Michael, go to your room and stay there until you realize how to let go of this ridiculous idea of you being ‘in love’ with the local undead weirdo.”

Nancy doesn’t even protest that it’s her summer break and she doesn’t actually have homework yet, instead she pulls Mike up the stairs and into his room. Her eyes blaze as she shuts the door. “Pack your stuff, Mike,” she says, tossing him an empty backpack sitting at the base of his closet.

“What?” he asks, fumblingly catching the bag.

She digs around in his old toy chest for a moment before pulling out the blue plug-in desk phone she’d hidden there before going to college. She finds the proper socket for it and plugs it in, dialing the Byers-Hopper’s phone number he’s very familiar with. “Pack, Mike!”

He follows her order as she begins talking on the phone, her voice low. He stuffs clothes into the bag, as well as a book and his supercom. He pulls his cap from his bookshelf and forces that in, as well. “Nance, what am I doing?”

She slams the phone down, face set into a determined glare. “You’re getting out of here. You don’t deserve this. This family is shit anyway.”

“Nancy—”

“Wait until I go back to my room,” she instructs. “Then climb out the window, take your bike out of the garage, and go to Will’s. I just talked to Mrs. Byers. She’s a little confused—you don’t have to tell her the whole story, unless you want to, but she says it’s okay for you to stay with her.”

“Nancy, I—” He cuts off when she looks at him, eyes hard and determined, and he swallows. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Nancy grins. “Thank me when I break the news to Mom and Dad tomorrow morning, and then again when I bring you more of your stuff.”

He hugs her, overwhelmed, because he kind of knew that his parents would react the way they did but he had no way of knowing Nancy would be this prepared. “I love you, Nance.”

“Yeah,” she replies, wrapping her arms around him. “I love you, too.” She pulls away and darts out the door, sending one last grin over her shoulder before shutting the door behind her. Mike springs into action, opening the window and jumping down into the rapidly darkening street.

One month later (July, 1988)

“I love you, Michael,” his mother says, and he feels trapped, cornered against the cheese aisle of the supermarket. He just wanted some *goddamn cheddar*, and instead he gets an unwanted conversation with his estranged mother.

“I love you, too, Mom,” he replies truthfully. “But we both know I can’t come home because what you just said isn’t really true.”

“Michael—”

“No, Mom,” he interrupts her. “It’s true. You love me, but only if I’m exactly what you want me to be. And I *can’t*. I love Jane, but I won’t date her, *won’t* marry her. And I love Will—I can’t marry him here, but I’ll damn well try, and there isn’t anything you can do about it.”

He sets his mouth into a firm line. “Now let me go.” She doesn’t move, and he glares. “Let me go.”

She finally backs up, and he strides past her. “Michael,” she says again. “I really do love you. I’m trying.”

The *Star Wars* nerd in him tells him, *do or do not, there is no try*, and frankly, he agrees. “That’s good, Mom. Tell me when you get there.”

“I love you,” Mike says against Will’s mouth, pushing him further back against the headboard of his bed. Their schoolbooks, brought out for an early start on their senior year summer homework, are scattered across the sheets, long since forgotten. “I love you I love you I love you.”

Will kisses him, too, unable to resist, but eventually draws back slightly to look Mike in the eyes. “Hey. Hey, Mike.” He puts a gentle hand on Mike’s shoulder and holds him in place. “Are you okay?” Because Mike is an open book, always, but not necessarily *this* open all the time.

Mike pulls back as well, and Will can see the hopelessness and desperation in the tears welling up. “Yeah,” he says, voice choked. “Yeah, I am. I just... I love you so much, and it’s... it’s so goddamn hard and it’s not fair.”

“I know,” Will agrees, and Mike knows that he does. “I know. Tell me what happened,” he says gently, and his voice is so soft and compelling that the words just flood out.

He tells Will about his mother at the supermarket, how much it hurt to see her after a month of avoiding his parents like it’s a religion, after not having anything to do with them other than what Nancy tells him or when he stops by the park to say hello to Holly. How much it hurts to know that she’ll never love him for who he is.

“That sucks,” Wills says after a beat once Mike is finished, and Mike laughs wetly because Will *understands*.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Yeah, it does.”

“But hey,” Will grins, sunshine peeking through dark clouds; a rainbow appearing in the sky. “We’ve got one year of school left, and then we’re out of this town. We’ll go somewhere—anywhere. With El and Lucas and Dustin and Max. We’ll get out, get jobs, go to college. We’ll be together. Just think about it.”

“Trust me,” Mike replies, smiling tentatively. “I’m thinking about it.”

Will looks up at him. “I love you,” he tells him.

Mike’s heart breaks and rebuilds itself in his chest, and his heart feels like it’s frozen and on fire all at the same time. His lungs fill up with the pure *love* he has for this boy, and he drowns in it for a minute; flails for air until Will kisses him and breathes oxygen into his mouth.

“I love you, too,” he gasps as he pulls away to draw air in before leaning in again, savoring the words. “I love you, too.”

Author's Note:

comments and kudos are, as always, appreciated.

find me on tumblr, my main is [@fivehargreeves](#) and my writing blog is [@lowriting!](#)